

**Female Bodies, Male Desires: Fighting (fe)male Conventions in the Writings of J.C. Mangan, J.S. Le Fanu and Bram Stoker**

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Female figures in nineteenth-century writings are a controversial issue; used both as symbols for the nation and as epitomes of weakness and frailty, they tend to occupy a secondary role in the fictions of the major (male) writings. This figure, however, has not proven to be consistent, being used in some cases to strengthen the idea of a dominant, powerful nation, as in the case of the British notion of 'Rule Britannia,' while in others it has been used to demasculinize and disempower the other, as is the case with nineteenth-century British misrepresentations of Ireland. Such a view has been challenged by new interpretations and scholarship, as well as by literary theory, and it can be asserted that the dichotomy female/weak vs. male/dominant is not as clear-cut as it could at first seem. Postcolonial readings of nineteenth-century texts can, therefore, shed a new light in the role female characters play in interpreting those texts. The literature written in Ireland during the 'long' nineteenth century is no exception; the short stories of J. C. Mangan, J. S. Le Fanu and Bram Stoker present readers with a new sort of female: a decisive and powerful force, ready to bring about national change. Both J. C. Mangan and J.S. Le Fanu deploy the female figure to abrogate and subvert a symbol which had been used by the British colonisers to ease their rule over Ireland, thus ushering not only a new, modern concept of the Irish nation but also a new perception of the Irish female, empowering the notion of the female as nation, and subverting British misrepresentations of Ireland as a female in need of a chivalrous (British) knight in shining armour which had justified British colonial interventions in Ireland. This trend is continued in the writings of Bram Stoker, which anticipate later deployments of the female during the Irish Renaissance to empower the Irish nation and fight off attached connotations of feebleness and frailty which British texts had assigned the Emerald Isle.

1. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of the female figure in nineteenth-century literature has been explored in depth by many critics, most notably Elleke Boehmer, Gina Wisker or C. L. Innes among others. The female figure has had various connotations, both in colonial literature, and in nationalist and post-colonial literature. If for the first one the female represented the land to be conquered, for the second one it was the mother that had to be rescued, the motherland whose liberation "would also involve the recovery of the mother tongue" (Innes 138). C. L. Innes is quick to remind her readers that

the iconic use of the female to represent the nation is not restricted to nationalist literature. As she puts it, "Britain and France are most frequently allegorized in female form, while patriotic citizens and colonial subjects were exhorted to fight for 'Mother England'" (138). In similar terms, Gina Wisker reminds us that

The idea of Mother Africa tends to indicate a close connection between women and the land and women and the maintenance of certain social behaviours [...]. Much writing by male authors depicts Africa as a woman,

Mother Africa in a celebratory, essentialist, mythic way. (112)

According to Wisker, what differentiates the point of view of colonizer and colonized is the perception of this female characteristic. Thus, while native peoples tend to perceive their motherland as celebratory, essentialist and mythic, the colonizers saw in the lands they were about to conquer a source of unexplored richness but also of adventure and the exotic. For them, those lands “appear as female body and a source of wealth. As such both the land and women are made exotic, exciting, sensual [...] to be owned, altered and ravished.” (Wisker 112)

Though Wisker’s view of how native peoples treat the female is more benevolent—one could say even naïve—the fact remains that the idea of the nation as female was also taken up by the nationalist cause. A paradigmatic example of this case is the figure of Cathleen Ni Houlihan representing Erin in Yeats’s homonymous play, and which was staged by the Irish nationalist leader Maud Gonne in 1902. This, of course, was a reaction to the British vision of Ireland as frail and in need of protection, which is in itself paradigmatic of the colonial enterprise. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explains, the colonial quest was very often explicated in terms of “white men saving brown women from brown men”.

Colonial writing extended this vision of the colonized as feminine not only to the land itself but also to the subjects that inhabited it. This goes hand in hand with the definition of the self and the other discussed before according to which the self is defined in direct opposition to the other. Thus, if colonialist writing wanted to transmit an image of the colonizer as mature and masculine, the colonized other—be it Indian or Irish—had to be perceived as effeminate and child-like per force. In nineteenth-century colonial logic, it immediately follows that these peoples had to be saved from themselves, and thus colonial writing performed a twofold task—one the one hand, it defined the colonial self and, on the other, it justified the colonial enterprise. As Innes explicates, “in a nineteenth-century context it could be argued that these feminine nations needed benevolent (but firm) male governance, just as the English law enforced the belief that wives should be subject to their husbands.” (139)

Not that the female figure was better treated in anticolonialist literatures. Very often these literatures drew on the dichotomy of the aggressive warrior and the submissive, passive female as model figures of behaviour (Innes 140). Despite individual efforts to subvert it, this dichotomy remains an intrinsic part of many postcolonial nations, where public activity is

defined as male, while private, domestic activities are defined as female (Innes 140). Hansen traces such representations in Irish literature back to the 1800 Act of Union, in which “each side defines the binary in terms of lustful masculine aggression against virtuous feminine vulnerability” (Hansen 14). Such national representations of the female could, nonetheless, be traced back to Irish legends and folklore, in which the male is very often portrayed as a warrior, while the female is either portrayed as a helpless damsel in need or as a powerful witch. Representations of the nation-woman waiting for the male hero to rescue her have so permeated Irish literature that they can be appreciated in Yeats’s *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902); so profound is its imprint in the Irish collective unconscious that Denis Johnston has parodied it along with other nationalist icons in his play *The Old Lady Says, No!* (1929). This is, of course, not particular to Irish nationalism but rather a widespread characteristic of many postcolonial, anticolonial and nationalist literatures. Innes mentions that the identification of the nation as female and of the male as her saviour “frequently influences the portrayal of women in anticolonial and postcolonial literature” (140) and goes on to cite the examples of the writers Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Soyinka, who centre their fiction, and their male characters, around female characters that represent the story of their people. This is also the case in Irish literature, where women become somehow signifiers of the nation. Suffice as examples the case of Nora in J. M. Synge’s *Shadow of the Glen* (1904) and Pegeen in *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), who are “perceived by audiences not only as ‘figures of Irish womanhood’ but also as in some sense representing the race as a whole in its suffering and its yearning for redemption” (Innes 141). Although these examples are more recent and, therefore, more accessible from a twenty-first century perspective, previous instances also abound. Maud, the female protagonist in Le Fanu’s *Uncle Silas* (1864) can be read in such terms. Her imprisonment and isolation in what constitutes her own property on the hands of his masculine, more powerful though distant relative yields such an interpretation.

This brief explanation suffices to see that the treatment of the female figure by both colonial and postcolonial literatures has been purposefully objectifying. Both colonizers and colonized looked for an iconic figure that could serve their interests by unifying different perceptions into a common one which helped them achieve their individual goals. Divergent as these were, it is nonetheless ironic that their treatment of the female was very similar, if not identical. This view is problematic for several women authors, who find the need to fight the association of the female as symbolic

of the nation, notably Elizabeth Bowen, the Irish poet Eavan Boland or the Nigerian writer Flora Nwapa (Innes 141-4). Their nineteenth-century precedent are, without a doubt, Edith Somerville and Martin Ross (Violet Martin) who, in their depictions of Irish life, will focus on “a female figure from the native community in terms of whom or against whom she [Somerville and Ross] can play off her conflicted sense of her Irishness, the battle in her spirit of two cultures, two loyalties, even two somewhat distinct senses or reality.” (Moynahan 173)

2. METHODOLOGY, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Female characters are conspicuously absent in Mangan's stories, and when they are present, it is usually as secondary characters. As has been seen, it is difficult to make a general statement when talking about Mangan's writings—or Mangan himself—given that he was a prolific writer who treated several genres at the same time: poetry, prose, sketches, or translations. The tone of such writings is eclectic, ranging from the solemn to the comic. As with many other aspects of his writings, there are notable exceptions to this latter affirmation. Let us not forget that Amelrosa is the main character in “Love, Mystery, and Murder” and that Fanny, though not the main character, plays an important role in “The Threefold Prediction”; still, typical of the colonial literature he was subverting, Mangan's emphasis is on the male. In the end—paraphrasing Elleke Boehmer—the colonial enterprise was a quest for “big boys”, and though Mangan was subverting it, nowhere is it apparent that he intended to change the basic principles that operate in this literature. Subversion implies that the genre must be recognizable if it is going to be perceived as altered. Mangan's stories adopt and adapt the colonial gaze. Typical of colonial literature, then, women are portrayed as submissive and secondary to the male. With the exception of Amelrosa in “Love, Murder, and Mystery”—a story in which the female character takes an unusually active role—the female characters in Mangan's short fiction are dependent on the male characters. But Mangan is far from showing us a naively submissive female. His female characters, though resigned to their condition, are conscious of their situation and try to make the most of it. This is clearly seen in the character of Livonia, Braunbrock's supposed lover in “The Man in the Cloak”. The first time the reader has an insight of her is by the use of direct speech, thus showing us a glimpse of her personality through her own words, “Ah! You don't know the world like me. You are a child, Maud, an infant, a babe. Men never love the way you speak; they have not the soul” (Mangan, *The Collected Works of James Clarence Mangan: Prose 1832-1839* 244). At this stage Livonia is busy talking

to her friend, Maud, about what the narrator classifies as “that one subject nearest [...] to the hearts of all women—Love” (Mangan, *The Collected Works of James Clarence Mangan: Prose 1832-1839* 244), when her conversation is interrupted by Braunbrock's knock on the door. Livonia is shown to be a woman with a certain insight of the world. However, in her case, this insight also means that she is a deceitful woman, having another lover, as the reader finds out from Maud herself, “I do think Rudolf unlike anybody else; [...] if you could see him sometimes when he fancies no one is noticing him” (Mangan, *The Collected Works of James Clarence Mangan: Prose 1832-1839* 244). Her knowledge of the world brings her to adopt a cynical and, at the same time, practical vision of something that is considered by most as an elevated feeling, love. This can be seen in a very interesting reflection on the conditions of women on the lips of Livonia, “what right have you to exact or expect such a sacrifice on my part? Is Beauty to harness herself to the car of Ugliness?” (Mangan, *The Collected Works of James Clarence Mangan: Prose 1832-1839* 245).

Through Livonia Mangan is presenting the case of women under colonial rule, who, according to Elleke Boehmer, were ‘doubly or triply marginalized’ (216). Boehmer argues that the conditions of those women living under colonial rule differed notably from those *belonging* to the colonizing group. The latter, though marginalized in their own way, still had some niches of privilege and partook, more or less actively, in the colonizing enterprise, being “travellers and settlers, or as writers, diary-makers, log-keepers [...]” and therefore also “shared certain colonialist attitudes (most obviously, stereotypical responses to Indigenous peoples)” (Boehmer 215). Colonized women were doubly marginalized, therefore, due to their status as colonial subjects *and* because of their gender. As Spivak puts it, “women are necessarily subordinated groups, whose expression cannot be other than in the language of the others who have subordinated them and so, in a sense [...] they cannot speak beyond the language available” (Wisker 135). Thus, to be able to survive in a male-dominated world, Livonia is forced to negotiate with the only tools she has at hand—Romance. Viewed in this light, her multiple courtships, her playing with Braunbrock and her words, “Ah! You don't know the world like me. You are a child, Maud, an infant, a babe” (Mangan, *The Collected Works of James Clarence Mangan: Prose 1832-1839* 244), all acquire a new meaning, that of survival.

Livonia is the object of desire, the prize to be won or, as Boehmer puts it, ‘the reward for a job well done’ (73). The parallelism between her condition and that

of the conquering of land is very tempting if not unavoidable. As has already been mentioned, for colonial writers and colonialists themselves, women were perceived as a trophy, the reward to be obtained by the conquering male. As Boehmer says, 'women figured [...] in the world beyond the seas [...] as seductive distraction or baleful presence, unmanning and polluting those who fell under her spell' (73). In a colonial world, women had no voice of their own. Even if they lived and shared in the colonial bounty, they did not have a right to choose. The female was still seen as an object to possess, a trophy. Not once does Braunbrock consider Livonia's sentiments. For him she is just part of the prize to be won but just as his attempt at bettering himself is doomed to fail, so his romance with Livonia is declared to be a fake.

Bearing in mind both the colonialist and the nationalist approach to the female as a nation-figure, Livonia's situation becomes that of Ireland, which was, de facto, part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. As such, it participated in the colonial enterprise, if rather unwillingly. Through their participation in the army or as settlers in distant countries, Irish people left their imprint in those countries they help to colonize, sometimes improving themselves and becoming rich as a consequence of this change. Like Livonia in "The Man in the Cloak", they had to learn to make the best of a bad situation; Livonia does not love Braunbrock, as she makes explicit several times. For her, Braunbrock is just a means towards an end. However, this *Entente Cordiale* cannot come to a good end. Finally, Livonia's affair is discovered and both she and Rudolf are threatened by Braunbrock with death. Similarly, Ireland's partaking in the colonial enterprise had to come to an end if the Irish nation wanted to come into being again, no matter how profitable it could prove for some individuals. Mangan would be, thus, enforcing Hansen's idea of the wrong marriage, for a metaphor for the necessity of disunion can be read in the character of Livonia.

As might seem clear by now, at the core of Mangan's stories there is a deep criticism of the colonial enterprise and of all who partook in it, and though certainly Mangan's work denounces the passive role of women, it is also clear from the example set through Livonia that they are to be held at least equally guilty. The colonial enterprise is a force for corruption, a destructive force which affects all those involved in it. And though references to the colonial situation in the story are subtle, they are nonetheless present. Let us not forget Braunbrock's description at the beginning of the story,

The Herr Johan Klaus Braunbrock, he to whom we thus introduce the reader, was cashier to the Banking-house, and had lingered somewhat beyond his time on this evening, from what motive we may possibly understand by-and-by. Let us try to depict his appearance. He was a man of the middle size, rather clumsily made, but with a finely-shaped head, and features expressive of considerable intellect—mingled, however, with a large proportion of worldly astuteness and an air of penetration and distrust that bespoke but an indifferent opinion of mankind, or, possibly, a mind ill at ease with itself. His age might be about forty. His grizzled hair had retreated from his forehead, which was broad, but not high, and indented with many wrinkles. Upon the breast of his blue coat glittered a military star, for he had served in the Imperial Army as a colonel of Austrian dragoons, and his salary of six hundred crowns a month as cashier was reinforced by a pension of five hundred dollars, paid to him quarterly by the War-office (Mangan, *The Collected Works of James Clarence Mangan: Prose 1832-1839* 239).

Long though this introduction to the main character in the story might seem, it is also very telling, for the reader knows that not only has he been involved in the military but that he is also working in a bank. He is, therefore, involved in two of the institutions which benefitted more from—and represented best—the colonial enterprise. These two institutions mentioned together contribute to bring to the mind of the reader reminiscences of the colonial quest, even if subliminally. Most importantly still, Braunbrock, as member of those two institutions, is representative of that very same quest. The portrait the reader is given, therefore, is not a pleasant one, since he is referred to as indifferent to mankind, solely interested in himself and covetous; let us remember that even though he has a salary and a pension, he has designed a plan to enrich himself further through forgery. In his pursue of power, he is even willing to submit his eternal soul. If Braunbrock is taken to be representative of the colonial mission, then this is shown to be a quest for richness in which the means justify the end, an idea which was very far from the civilizing mission colonial reading was supposed to transmit.

This idea is also explored through the character of Livonia, who—as already stated—is equally corrupted. Even if her actions can be justified as an act of survival, everything in her demeanour points at greed rather than endurance. Not all feminine

characters are viewed in such a negative light, though. The portrayal of the female in Mangan is as varied as in colonial literature itself.

The representation of the female does not, however, seem to follow a predetermined plan. Mangan seems to have adapted his female characters to the needs of the particular narrative he was writing at the time. Thus, the female varies in strength and in presence, since in some stories, such as “An Extraordinary Adventure in the Shades”, it is not present at all, while in others, such as “Love, Mystery, and Murder”, the woman plays the main role.

All of them seem to have something in common—they are all constrained by the rules of a male-dominated society. Even in “Love, Mystery, and Murder”, Amelrosa—the main character—feels this constraint. This can be better observed in one of the final scenes, when Amelrosa, after all her misadventures, arrives at the palace of the Prince of Weathercock Island. Up to this moment, she has proved a character of strong will and resolution, able to pursue her desires to the utmost consequences. When she finally finds her supposed lover, she is denied an audience, which she accepts in an unbecoming meekly way,

Amelrosa advanced and endeavoured to gain a hearing, but in vain. The Prince protested that upon his honor he could not give any one an audience until he had concealed his eighth beaker. In the meantime, he drew from beneath a sofa a three-legged stool and tossed it into a corner, that the unhappy damsel might, if she pleased, accommodate herself with a seat. The Prince tossed off sic beakers with miraculous grace and rapidity, worthy of the son of a king (Mangan, *The Collected Works of James Clarence Mangan: Prose 1832-1839* 61).

What follows in the story is a continuation of the overall burlesque tone. Despite this, one cannot help but notice the degrading behaviour the Prince shows towards Amelrosa. Worse still, her attitude is completely submissive. Truth be told, female characters in the nineteenth century were not expected to behave as tomboys, embarking in adventures and going to faraway lands, especially if they belonged to the higher classes, as Amelrosa does. Still, her behaviour is in dissonance with the rest of the story and it certainly manages to capture the readers' attention. Mangan certainly makes a point here, for if Amelrosa's behaviour in this scene is in dissonance with the rest of the story, it is not so with the rest of the female characters in Mangan's stories, and she certainly lives up to nineteenth-century expectations of the role a woman should take. Amelrosa is

completely submissive to whom she thinks can be her husband—the Prince of Weathercock Island—and so obeys him, no matter how dismissive of her person he might be. In a way, the figure of Amelrosa is reminiscent of Maturin's Immalee in *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). Despite her growing up in what can only be term as an earthly paradise, she, too, falls prey to male desires by agreeing to marry Melmoth, “‘Wed me by this light,’ cried Immalee, ‘and I shall be yours for ever!’” (Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer* 360), an agreement she repeats again, once she has been “rescued” from her island and brought back to Spain with her family, under the Christian name of Isidora.

In the remaining stories, the female characters are shown as passive figures, always complying with the desires of the male characters and suffering their decisions. Paradigmatic is the case of Aurelia Von Elsberg in “The Thirty Flasks”. Aurelia is in love with Basil, the hero in the story; however, she decides to comply with her parents' wishes for her to marry the Prince of Lowenfeld-Schwartzbach, even though her heart is set on Basil, “She tried, in compliance with the wishes of Papa and Mamma, to look at the Prince, but somehow the image of Basil constantly interfered with her best attempts” (Mangan, *The Collected Works of James Clarence Mangan: Prose 1832-1839* 195). In an exemplary case of the female question, Aurelia is given no real voice at all in the narrative. Even when the reader hears her utmost desires, these are transmitted through the agency of a third person narrator. Thus, the main female character in the story is doubly marginalized—in the story as well as through the narrative technique.

It is, however, in “The Threefold Prediction” where the female figure is explored more deeply and meaningfully. This story, along “The Man in the Cloak” and “The Thirty Flasks”, is Mangan's finest, not only stylistically but also thematically speaking. Not in vain are these his last three original stories—let us not forget that “The Remorse of a Night” is a translation. As was mentioned before, “The Threefold Prediction” is also the story which deals more directly with the topic of colonialism. It goes without saying that this does not mean the story is mainly concerned with the colonial enterprise *prima facie*. As always with Mangan's Gothic writings, these topics run under the surface, appearing at the right moment to emphasize feelings of guilt and remorse.

In the paragraph which preceded the beginning of this section, I referred to this story when alluding to the apparent lack of voice native peoples are given in colonial writing, hinting at the fact that this voice is further marginalized by the fact that it is transmitted through the character of a woman. This marginalization does, of course, also work for the

female. She is doubly marginalized because she is a woman and, therefore, her opinion borders in the child-like, and because of her closeness to native peoples. Doctor Grosstrotter dismisses her ailments on the bases of her nature prone to hallucinations, that is, to imagining things and to create stories—as children do—and he then dismisses it further when he learns the source of those imaginings,

“Pardon *me*,” said I, “I know better. Your complete vigilance did not occur until after your swoon. No one ever sees ghosts when broad awake. Such hallucinations as yours always take place in the intermediate region between sleep and waking, which is the especial domain of imagination. From thence it is that this freakish and fantastic power brings forth creations various, according to the slumberer’s condition of mind and body. Had you been reading Jacob Boehmen instead of Bernardin St. Pierre I have no doubt that, like Mohammed, you would have been rapt that night into the seventh heaven.” (Mangan, *The Collected Works of James Clarence Mangan. Prose: 1840-1882* 136-7)

As can be seen, Fanny is a doubly marginalized subject. It is true that there is an element that diffuses this—the fact that Doctor Grosstrotter may be himself guilty of pride, a malady usually associated with medical practitioners and lawyers, since from the very beginning of the story he affirms he knows the remedy for Fanny’s illness, even before he has really done any check-ups. True though this argument might run, it does not alter the fact that Fanny’s opinions are given no credit but are rather dismissed as the product of an altered conscience caused by contact with the consequences of the colonial question. In fact, it is very telling that Mangan chose a female character to perform a threefold function, in consonance with the title of the story, for Fanny works as the prism through which not only the colonial and the female questions are seen but also through which Gothic is expressed. The association of these three elements in one single character contributes to their mutual perception as marginalized subjects, which in turn contributes to Mangan’s denunciation of the colonial quest. Let us not forget that the colonial enterprise meant more than the marginalization of individuals, it meant the marginalization of whole cultures which suffered a process of otherization and were subsequently considered as inferior. As we will explore later on, Mangan shows how the colonial is far from being a civilizing mission and how ultimately it has a heavy burden upon colonized and colonizers alike.

As we have seen, the female in Mangan is representative of the colonial gaze, portraying passive symbols rather than active, individual characters (Innes 144). It is true, though, that Mangan’s stories depict the figure of the woman as a marginalized subject and as slightly closer to the colonized other than their male counterparts. However, he is still depicting the colonial gaze, even if from a female perspective regardless of whether he intended to subvert it. The women who appear in his stories all belong to the same social group as their male counterparts, thus sharing in the same vices as them, even if reluctantly. Truth be told, they are trapped in a male-dominated world and their choices are limited. If European women “experienced discrimination in the masculine world of the Empire, still [they] more often than not formed part of the same race and social group as their male consorts.” (Boehmer 215)

Mangan’s representations of the female as the nation-body acquire a different resonance in Le Fanu’s stories. To the representation of the female as the nation—so widespread in the nineteenth century—one must add familial disruption. Margot Gayle Backus in *The Gothic Family Romance* (1999) asserts that “The Anglo-Irish gothic family romance [...] serves [...] to make parallel and therefore natural and self-evident the external, political realm and the internal, intrapsychic realm and, hence, the past and the present” (19). Indeed, many critics, among them Luke Gibbons or Jim Hansen, have seen in the Irish Gothic writers’ portrayal of Anglo-Irish families the underlying tensions which trouble the Ascendancy ruling class. In fact, for Hansen, marriages—particularly, *failed* marriages—define the boundaries of Irish Gothic fiction. As he asserts, “the generic boundaries of Irish Gothic fiction, and subsequently the entire genealogy of the canonical Irish modernist novel, should be redrawn around the central trope of the Gothic marriage. This new genealogy allows us to read the novels of Maturin, J. S. Le Fanu, Oscar Wilde, Bram Stoker, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett as working within, responding to, or extending Ireland’s tradition of Gothic fiction” (Hansen 17-8). Gibbons’ analysis of Irish Gothic is yet more striking insofar as he delves into nineteenth-century depictions of Irish—in fact, Celtic—people as degenerate, an idea which is subsequently linked to British and Anglo-Irish fears of contagion, pollution and degeneration. All these ideas were widespread through the Victorian era and found their paramount expression in the blood-sucking vampire best represented in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. As Gibbons states, “[f]or Stoker—and for late Victorian culture—race was essentially a matter of blood, and the ease with which Count Dracula enters the mainstream of British society plays on anxieties

about its relationship to disease, heredity, and cultural intermingling” (78). This section will turn now to explore the nature of the Anglo-Irish dysfunctional family in relation to land ownership and belonging by delving into Le Fanu’s short story “A Passage in the Secret History of an Irish Countess”—itself a precursor of his novel *Uncle Silas*—, by analysing how the Anglo-Irish necessity to justify and retain control of the land complicates and denaturalizes family relationships, themselves a portrait of the complicated relation of the Ascendancy with Ireland and Irish culture.

“A Passage in the Secret History of an Irish Countess”, first published in the *DUM* in 1838, is part of Le Fanu’s first collected stories, *The Purcell Papers*. Told from a female point of view, the plot is pretty straightforward: a young heiress goes to live to her uncle’s old family manor, where instead of finding the familial protection she craves for, she finds herself trapped—both metaphorically and literally. Finally, she manages to escape, and the story ends with a certain kind of divine justice, as her tormentors find “the terrible, the tremendous retribution which, after long delays of many years, finally overtook and crashed them” (Le Fanu, *The Purcell Papers* 118). The narrative stems around two basic plot elements which were to feature in *Uncle Silas*—a heroine undergoing an ordeal engineered by her father in his will, and the so-called ‘Locked Room Mystery’, a motif which seems to have been invented by Le Fanu and was subsequently adopted by other writers like Poe (Sage, Introduction x). A third one should be added to these: the murder story which haunts Margaret’s uncle and, therefore, all the family, and which prompts the execution of the will, intended to “prove to the world how great and unshaken was his confidence in his brother’s innocence and honour” (Le Fanu, *The Purcell Papers* 92). Even this brief recount suffices to show Le Fanu’s story as a portrayal of the twisted relationships inherent to Anglo-Irish families.

Forced marriages, infanticide, sexual abuse, haunted manors or vampirism are all but manifestations of the Anglo-Irish tangled relationships with their native country, their Williamite past and their ambiguous relations with England, and such tropes often populate the works of such Irish Gothic writers as Maturin or Stoker. Being at the same time outsiders and insiders, Irish and alien to Ireland, the Ascendancy class have always been in need to reassert their claim to the land and to satisfy their need to belong, and in this Le Fanu’s work is no exception. His portrait of Anglo-Irish landed families often speaks out of a dysfunctional relation among the members of the families who populate his stories. This dysfunction manifests itself in various ways through the Dubliner’s

writings, most typically involving father vs son quarrels or brother vs brother disparages, as has been seen in earlier sections. The epitome of these strained relationships can be appreciated in its prime in “Squire Toby’s Will. A Ghost Story”, in which the *pater familias* of an ancient Saxon family, the eponymous Toby Marston, master of Gylingden Hall, sets his two sons—the eldest, Scroop and the youngest, Handsome Charlie—against one another by disinheriting the former, only to come in his afterlife (in the Gothic trope of a dream) to haunt Handsome Charlie and make him reinstate Scroop as the rightful heir of Gylingden. The consequences of such acts, the brutality stated in the story—both implicitly and overtly—, together with its being set in England, all act as constant reminders of the ferocity and incongruence of British rule in Ireland. The fact that the rightful heir is disinherited from his ancient estate and has to fight to recover what is legitimately his, acts as a reminder of the Williamite conquest of Ireland, in which many an Irish family was evicted from their rightful property. Similarly, the fact the Handsome Charlie is at odds with his situation as possessor of Gylingden, the fact that he is—quite literally—haunted by his past, is a faithful portrayal of the situation of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy in Ireland.

Nevertheless, one of the most interesting figures in Le Fanu’s stories in terms of identity representations, claims to land ownership and belonging is, without a doubt, that of the female. In “A Passage in the Secret History of an Irish Countess” this plays a central role, since it is through the female narrator that the action in the story is focalized. In fact, readings of female representations in literature worldwide abound both in feminist and postcolonial interpretations. C. L. Innes has highlighted how Rushdie’s novels tend towards an identification of the female and the nation, as have other works by such postcolonial African writers as Wole Soyinka, Léopold Senghor or Camara Laye (Innes 137-8). In a less positive light, Elleke Boehmer has also shown how women have been doubly or triply marginalized, since they were not only subaltern beings due to their race but also to their gender (Boehmer 215-20). Such assertions should come as no surprise since female images were used all through the nineteenth century both in Britain and in Ireland to represent opposite interests. In Britain, Ireland was shown as a feeble woman in need of a protection which was readily supplied by the sturdy British male; at the same time, in Ireland this image was used by a nascent Irish nationalism to characterize British terror, where the British male was the terrorizer, while the binary Ireland/female was presented as the terrorized. Hansen traces representations like this back to Edmund Burke’s and William Sampson’s representations of familial relationships, “[w]here Burke had opposed the

concept of familial affection to terror in order to help craft and sustain the English system, Sampson evokes affection for the victimized in order to inveigh against an English system that is itself a form of terror.” (Hansen 14)

Undoubtedly, what both the Anglo-centric and the Irish nationalist vision share is their representation of the nation as female, even if their intentions in so doing differ. However, it would be an overstatement to assert that such representations were unique to Ireland; other nations were—and are—represented as female, among them France or even Britain when not set in opposition to Ireland. The difference seems to be that in the Irish case this feminization of the country was used by the British media of the time to feminize all of the Irish nation in an attempt to show the Irish as weak and in need of protection—even if this meant protection against themselves—, thus justifying the prior Williamite invasion and the subsequent narrative of colonization which was applied to the country.

Such narratives were commonly used when deploying an imperial system, forming part of what Elleke Boehmer defines as *othering*, a process which shows the colonial other as lesser when compared to the superiority of the colonizer.² Women were only the by-product of such an enterprise, “as seductive distraction or baleful presence, unmanning and polluting for those who fell under her spell” (Boehmer 73). In fact, the Countess in the story is perceived and treated as this “seductive distraction or baleful presence” to which I have just alluded. Just at the beginning of the narrative, when she recalls her infancy, she speaks of her relationship with her father in such terms, “he seemed to take no further interest in my happiness or improvement than a conscientious regard to the discharge of his own duty would seem to claim” (Le Fanu, *The Purcell Papers* 86), already foreshadowing the central role the trope of the dysfunctional family will play in the story.

Far from fighting this image, the incipient cultural Irish nationalism used, in a remarkable example of mimicry deployment, this very same image but to suggest quite a different thing. Julia M. Wright has summarized it dexterously when she asserts that

The representation of Ireland as female is a common one, and, in its pro-Irish avatar, employs, and often collapses, two sentimental figures: the suffering maiden-in-distress, requiring chivalric men to rise to her

defence; the proudly defiant spirit, maintaining dignity and virtue in the face of powerful oppression. Always beautiful, often with a melodious voice, and necessarily sensible and moral, Ireland personified — whether Hibernia, Erin, or Kathleen Ny Houlihan, whether genius, spirit, or exemplary embodiment — becomes a rallying point for male heroism. (Wright 56)

These two images Wright speaks of do share an important characteristic which ties in very well with a concept of heroine which had been created and used well before the cultural nationalism of the 1830s—the Gothic heroine.³ By definition “well-bred, passive and respectable” (Day 16), she finds herself trapped in the Gothic world for reasons not her own, being subsequently “defeated in the course of the plot to demonstrate that virtue is [her] own reward” (MacAndrew 54). It is here where Le Fanu’s deployment of the female heroine acquires special relevance. Le Fanu’s characterization of the female heroine builds up to a questioning of Irish identity by reconsidering the role of Anglo-Irish Ascendancy in relation to land ownership, questioning their legitimacy. Quite literally, in this story possessing the female means possessing the land, since it is only by marrying her that the right to property can be gained. To be able to claim ownership over the land, masculine characters must first exercise control over the female—either by possessing her or by disposing of her, “The provisions of his [the father’s] will were curious [...]: all his vast property was left to me, and to the heirs of my body, for ever [sic]; and, in default of such heirs, it was to go after my death to my uncle, Sir Arthur, without any entail” (Le Fanu, *The Purcell Papers* 92). As can be seen, the woman is objectified; she becomes a possession—a “body”—, a linking device to and a justification of inheritance. But this paragraph plays also two more functions: firstly, it casts a doubt over the narrator’s uncle, as just before the provisions for the will are read, the murderous past which haunts the family has been unveiled. Secondly, it brings to mind a fact which is paramount for the story and for Irish Gothic fiction—that the female is encapsulated by the male, a constraint which is to be maintained all through the story; the decision to move in with her uncle was taken by a male figure—her father—, once she enters the Gothic world—her uncle’s manor—she remains a prisoner of the male gaze, both physically and psychologically. Ironically, the same institution which should offer her protection

² As Boehmer asserts, “colonized peoples were presented as [...] less human, less civilized, as child or savage, wild man, animal, or headless man.” (Boehmer 76)

³The figure of the Gothic heroine descends from the earlier Sensational novel female figure. (Day 16)

collapses before her eyes and becomes a symbol of Gothic entrapment. Her cousin Edward frightens and terrorizes her, “if anything could have added to the strong aversion which I have long felt towards him, it would be his attempting thus to trick and frighten me into a marriage he knows to be revolting to me, and which is sought only as a means for securing to himself whatever property is mine” (Le Fanu, *The Purcell Papers* 101), while she regards her uncle “with the mingled fear and loathing with which one looks upon an object which has tortured them in a nightmare” (Le Fanu, *The Purcell Papers* 102). Even when the dysfunctionality of the family institution prompts her to escape her captors at the end of the story, she is ultimately saved by a male trope—the military garrison. As can be seen, the female remains a by-product of the male gaze: her world is defined and encapsulated by male actions.

There is still a deeper reading; if the female character is read under the dichotomy colonized vs. colonizer, and following the nineteenth-century convention which identifies the female with the nation, it can be asserted that the nation/female is entrapped in the dialectic of the colonial system. Paradoxically, it is this constant reinforcement of female entrapment which acts as a reminder of the male's feeble position. On analysing Le Fanu's deployment of the female narrator in *Uncle Silas*, Milbanks mentions that “[h]er perceptions and her story will be shown to be a way of describing the situation of any woman within [...] a debilitated and debased patriarchy” (Milbank 365). As Hansen reminds us, because of the feminization of Irish society, male characters in Irish Gothic fiction acquire and display feminine traits (Hansen 22). Curiously enough, male characters become passive, even if—as can be appreciated in the story—they still crave for a dominant role over the female. The result when read through a postcolonial lens is that male characters in Irish Gothic fiction tend towards violent outbursts due to their double nature as female/Irish and male/Anglo-Irish. This violence permeates all sectors of society, even its most basic pillars. In literature this violence manifests itself against the family institution, denaturalizing it (e.g. unnatural marriages) in an attempt to perpetuate the same family it has corrupted and to retain control over the land the claim. This, as Le Fanu's story shows, results in the final disappearance of both the female/nation and the male/Anglo-Irish.

This constraint is further enhanced by the narrative structure itself. The stories contained in the collection are loosely connected by the usage of a common narrator, Father Purcell, a Catholic priest who gives authenticity to the narratives and introduces them (Sage, *Le Fanu's Gothic: the Rhetoric of Darkness* 11).

This mode of narration, typical of Le Fanu's, has a deeper reading in terms of the female figure; despite attempts at textual integrity—“[t]he following passage is written in female hand and was no doubt communicated to my much regretted friend by the lady whose early history it serves to illustrate” (Le Fanu, *The Purcell Papers* 85)—the narration itself is handed down to the reader by two different male hands: first, by Purcell, who claims to have written the accounts down faithfully, and, ultimately, by the collector and publisher in the fiction of *The Purcell Papers*, who remains anonymous. Whether the narrative presented by both male narrators has been altered or not, there is no questioning that the female narrator remains constricted by the male gaze, i.e. she is actually not telling her own story. Further still, Le Fanu's narrative technique further complicates the male vs female reading. By attempting to control her narrative, both Purcell and the anonymous male narrator lose control over the overall narrative since neither is fully telling the story. The very narrative structure foreshadows the final collapse of such workings since the act of constraining the female blurs the final male narrative. By using three subsequent narrators, Le Fanu distances the author from the reader, casting a reasonable doubt on textual integrity and—most importantly—authorship.

Thus read, the story can be interpreted as the fear of dispossession and the subsequent attempt by the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy to retain their social and economic status. Since male/Anglo-Irish can be seen as both agents and sufferers of the colonial enterprise, we can interpret their actions as the realization of the colonial system which was imposed on Ireland, and since the binary female/Ireland has already rejected Hansen's unhappy marriage, the binary male/Anglo-Irish must resource to other means to preserve their claim, even if this is illegitimate and the means imply violence. Unlike true colonizers, the Anglo-Irish have no other place to call home, and much in the image of other settler and creole nations, they are forced to create their own. Rejection and defeat would imply becoming Maturin's wanderer, not dead and yet not alive. Hansen reminds us how the Irish male must confront the issue of dispossession, as he finds himself cut off from the public sphere and from history, unable to claim ancestry nor look to the future (Hansen 22). Faced with the issue of dispossession and not belonging implied by the Countess' rejection of the marriage proposal, Sir Arthur terrorises her thus, “if he were what you have described him, think you, girl, he could find no briefer means than wedding contracts to gain his ends? ‘twas but to gripe your slender neck until the breath had stopped, and lands, and lakes, and all were his.” (Le Fanu, *The Purcell Papers* 102). This terrorising, however, only produces the opposite

reaction and the Countess revolts against her oppressors, which can be easily read as an allegory for the violent outbreaks which plagued Nineteenth-century Ireland and which the Ascendancy class so feared. Just as she is escaping, the Countess encounters the French maid who had aided her uncle to seclude her fast asleep, "A knife lay upon the table, and the terrible thought struck me—'Should I kill this sleeping accomplice in the guilt of murder, and thus secure my retreat?'" (Le Fanu, *The Purcell Papers* 116)

Read in the context of the cultural nationalism of the 1830s, which advocated a reinterpretation of Irish history favouring a union of the native Catholics and the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, the escape and ultimate decease of the male/Anglo-Irish is a consequence of the unsuccessful attempt at illegitimate possession of the female/nation, a fact which leads the latter to revolt against the dominating masculine figure. Paradoxically, however, this act of liberation results in her—and her family's—final extinction, thus ultimately terminating the female/nation. As we learn at the beginning of the narrative, "[Countess D—] is no more—she long since died, a childless and a widowed wife [...]. Strange! two powerful and wealthy families, that in which she was born, and that into which she had married, have ceased to be—they are utterly extinct" (Le Fanu, *The Purcell Papers* 85). Dysfunctional families like the one portrayed in "A Passage in the Secret History of an Irish Countess" are an acknowledgement of the waning power of the Ascendancy class. The final collapse of the family, a basic pillar in society, constitutes a warning against the oppressive systems deployed by the Ascendancy in relation to land ownership and the Catholic majority. Just as in the story there is no final reconciliation, only an attempt at retaining control by exerting domination, so the Irish nation could be doomed to disappearance should there be no national compromise. Quoting Backus, "Irish and Anglo-Irish identities in various ways symptomatically blur and collapse, so that both [...] are depicted as appropriated, unconscious bodies spoken by a demonic god of colonial history that, over time, consumes colonizer and colonized alike." (Backus 108)

The female figure in Stoker is yet more complex to analyse. Many critics, among them Kathleen L. Spencer, have noted how the Dubliner's longer fiction challenges Victorian fin-de-siècle anxieties about the threat of hybridization. Both *Dracula* (1897) and the *Jewel of the Seven Stars* (1903) portray ancient figures from the East (a vampire and a resurrected Egyptian Queen, respectively) which threaten modern Western civilisation—"seeking to objectively reproduce the Orient, Western science fails before the occult power

of the East and instead becomes the surface on which the East reduplicates itself" (Wright 195). Stoker's shorter fiction reacts differently to hybridization, however, as has already been pointed out. Hybridization is, for Stoker, the solution, not the problem.

In many of his stories, the female figure is still portrayed as a source of conflict or as a prize to be won, if not both at the same time. This is the case in "The Coming of Abel Behenna". In this story, Abel Behennan and Eric Sanson, "both young, both good-looking, both prosperous, and who had been companions and rivals from their boyhood" (Stoker, *Dracula's Guest and Other Weird Stories* 75) fight over the love of Sarah Trefusis, who—unable to decide on either—lets them toss a coin, "the man who wins takes all the money that we both have got, brings it to Bristol and ships on a voyage and trades with it. Then he comes back and marries Sarah, and two keep all" (Stoker, *Dracula's Guest and Other Weird Stories* 80). The bet is given an extra turn by adding the prerogative of a timespan of a year. Abel wins the bet and sets off on his journey, keeping no communication with his betrothed, however. As time passes by, and the appointed period comes to an end without any news from him, Eric's hopes are encouraged. It so happens that on the day which should see the coming home of Abel a great storm comes on, the "sea rose and lashed the western coast from Skye to Scilly and left a tale of disaster everywhere" (Stoker, *Dracula's Guest and Other Weird Stories* 84). The *Lovely Alice*, sailing from Bristol to Penzance, is caught up in this maelstrom, and a shipwreck follows. Without a minute's hesitation, Eric goes to the cliffs to try and rescue anyone who may have escaped the disaster, showing great prowess by risking his life to save a man who had fallen into a recess, only to discover when lifting him with the help of a rope, that the person whose life he is saving is Abel,

On the instant a wave of passion swept through Eric's heart. All his hopes were shattered, and with the hatred of Cain his eyes looked out. He saw in the instant of recognition the joy in Abel's face that his was the hand to succour him, and this intensified his hate. Whilst the passion was on him he started back, and the rope ran out between his hands. (Stoker, *Dracula's Guest and Other Weird Stories* 87)

From then on, Eric becomes a haunted man, and strange tales begin to be heard about a monster appearing on the very same spot where he had dropped Abel. Finally, on the day of the wedding, the corpse of Abel Behenna is found, with the rope around his waist.

Of key importance in this story is the figure of the female, in this case incarnated in the person of Sarah Trefusis. The female figure in this story is characterized as both the prize to be won, and as a capricious and demanding goddess. Ironically, her role in the story is secondary, just providing an argument to trigger Abel's adventure. Significantly, though, Sarah seems aware of the capriciousness of her wont. As has been mentioned before, unable to choose between her two suitors, she accepts a cruel offer—a toss of a coin in which one of them will get everything the other wants and possesses. In fact, it is her who adds the temporal span to the bet, “‘I’ll marry him on my next birthday,’ said Sarah. Having said it, the intolerably mercenary spirit of her action seemed to strike her, and impulsively she turned away with a bright blush” (Stoker, *Dracula's Guest and Other Weird Stories* 80). But this instant of recognition does not last, as she does nothing to stop what she really knows will be a terribly curse on one of the men. In fact, since the very beginning, Sarah is described as “vain and something frivolous” (Stoker, *Dracula's Guest and Other Weird Stories* 76). The female figure would then be incarnating Boehmer's colonial prerogative of the woman as “seductive distraction or baleful presence” (Boehmer 70) or Innes's land to be governed by the male (Innes 139). There is, however, a weak point in this argument. Keeping up with nineteenth-century tropes of the female as a representation of the nation, Sarah is revealed as a colonizer figure, being the reverse image of the colonial quest—she incarnates the colonizer's homeland; Sarah is England sending her sons to the conquering of foreign lands. At the very beginning of the story, the narrator outlines both Abel's and Eric's foreign origins, “Abel Behenna was dark with the gypsy darkness which the Phoenician mining wanderers left in their track; Eric Sanson [...] was fair, with the ruddy hue which marked the path of the wild Norseman” (Stoker, *Dracula's Guest and Other Weird Stories* 75). Both Abel and Eric are a by-product of a much older hybridisation, which is portrayed in a positive light, as has been seen earlier on, both sporting good personal traits and a prosperous future at home. It is the figure of Sarah—the only one who can claim an ancient belonging to Cornish land—who pollutes and destroys them. Read thus, the story reverses one of the inner structures of colonialism, revealing it as a force for devastation—Sarah is not the prize to be won but rather the cause of destruction. Her caprice ruins Abel's and Eric's friendship, and prompting the death of the former and the unmaning of the latter—for Eric has lost all honour. If in Le Fanu the colonial quest destroyed one of the pillars of society—the family—, in Stoker another pillar collapses—friendship and the stability of community life.

3. CONCLUSION

In the Irish Gothic short story, then, the female figure constitutes an appropriation of colonialists' views of the female. As has been seen, the identification of the female and the national was a widespread feature in nineteenth-century literature, and the incipient nationalist movements (among them the Irish) took advantage of this. In an attempt to justify colonization, British imperial powers sought an identification of Ireland as female, and therefore, weak, feeble and in need of protection. Further from dispelling this image, the nationalist movement reinforced it, only conveying the idea that the female nation ought to be saved from the colonizer invader. Female portrayals in J.C. Mangan's short narratives build on this idea. Mangan's female characters are dependent on their male counterparts, exemplifying the role of women under colonial rule. They become the object of desire, the prize to be won, even if this is against their wish. J.C. Mangan's depiction of the female does, however, expose a further, perhaps less obvious consequence. Through the identification of the female with the nation, and her connivance with the colonial enterprise represented by his male characters, Mangan is also criticizing Ireland's role in the colonial enterprise, even if this can be justified. Just like women under colonial rule, Ireland was colonized and colonizer at the same time. All in all, J.C. Mangan's strongest criticism is that of the passive role assigned to women under colonial rule, for even in those stories where the female plays a more proactive role, they invariably end up submitting to the tidings of their male counterparts. The fact that this submission is always related to colonial rule constitutes a denunciatory stance of colonial standards and morals.

J.S. Le Fanu goes a step further and adds familial disruption to this equation, his depictions of Anglo-Irish families always signalling the underlying tensions of the Ascendancy class. Being originally alien to Ireland and in essence an invading force, the Anglo-Irish have always had the need to reassert their claim to proprietorship, a claim which is carried out by the possession of the female. In this J.S. Le Fanu continues with J.C. Mangan's representation of the female as the nation, for in Le Fanu's short narratives, possessing the female is, quite literally, possessing the land. The female figure is the key to inheritance and, paradoxically enough, this transforms the family home from a protective environment into an entrapment, an encapsulating space, denaturalizing the concept of the family. Paradoxically, Anglo-Irish efforts to control and dominate the female only reinforce their feeble position, thus concluding with their disappearance. As the works of Bram Stoker show, however, this can be prevented via hybridization. Notwithstanding, Stoker's representation of the female takes a different approach

to that of J.C. Mangan and J.S. Le Fanu. Stoker builds on the idea of the female as a nation-figure but he subverts the idea and displaces the focus so that the female is not the colonized subject but the colonizer mother country sending away her children to destruction, becoming both the source of conflict and the prize to be won at the same time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Jorge Fernández received his BA in English Studies at the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU) and later on proceeded to enhance his knowledge in the field of literature with an MA in Anglo-Irish Literature and Drama at University College Dublin, where his minor thesis on the relation of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu and the Gothic tradition was directed by Declan Kiberd. He completed his PhD at the University of Santiago de Compostela researching the relationship between the short story and the Irish Gothic tradition in the writings of James Clarence Mangan, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker. He has worked as an English literature teacher at an IB school while continuing with his research on the Irish short story in the nineteenth century, and is currently Applied Language, Translation and Interpretation Senior Lecturer at the European University of the Atlantic.

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